

Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South. Edited by Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xix + 324 pp. Index, notes, tables. Cloth, \$55.00; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-807-82735-5; paper 0-807-85410-7.

Reviewed by Nancy Bercaw

The issues of southern distinctiveness, the South's relation to the market, and the particular timing and nature of the region's transition to capitalism have gripped scholars of southern history, more or less directly, since the inception of the field. How does the history of "working women" help us to reconceptualize these topics? Did the market revolution penetrate the Old South and alter antebellum social relations? How has our emphasis on the plantation—on mistresses and enslaved women—kept historians from confronting awkward questions that might disrupt assumptions regarding the distinctiveness of the southern political economy before the Civil War? These are but a few of the questions posed by Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie in their introduction to *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women in the Old South*. They are significant questions. As one might expect, there are no easy answers.

The editors organize the volume into four parts: Rural Women; Wage-Earning Women; Professional Women; and Industrial Workers. These sections reveal the impressive numbers of women who did not fit the categories of lady and slave. American Indians, domestic workers, yeomen women, prostitutes, seamstresses, mill workers, ironmongers, slaveholding nuns, African American nuns, and schoolteachers are just some of the subjects represented in the essays. By including so many in the broad sweep between lady and slave, the editors "invite readers to rethink the conventional and limiting definition of worker as paid laborer" (p. 1). Southern women's experiences, they argue, were "profoundly circumscribed by labor—reproductive and productive, paid and unpaid—across age, class, race, place and time" (p. 3). Yet privileging unpaid labor, while excluding slavery and enslaved women from analysis, seems an odd choice: a curious byproduct of women's labor history framed in the northern context. Paying attention to slavery reminds us of the degrees of freedom and constraint embedded within

the wage-labor system in both North and South. (See Laura F. Edwards, “The Problem of Dependency,” *Agricultural History*, 1998; Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*, 1998; and Christopher L. Tomlins, *Law, Labor, and Ideology*, 1993.) Moreover, slavery pushes us beyond a vague focus on people who work and asks us to rethink or sharpen our understanding of class.

The volume is on surer footing when it emphasizes the place of the market in the antebellum South. The strength of *Neither Lady Nor Slave* emerges in the exploration of how domestic hierarchies, undergirded by slavery, tempered southern market relations. The editors and contributors define “the market” broadly as both an “economic concept” and a “physical meeting place.” In the first essay, James Taylor Carson tackles the distinction directly. Carson asserts that while southern Indian women became more active in a trade rather than a subsistence-surplus economy, their activities cannot be properly understood as constituting a “market economy.” Changing economic structures did not alter social relations or cultural values. Instead, Carson builds upon Winifred Rothenberg’s argument that Indians created a “marketplace economy” (*From a Marketplace to a Market Economy*, 1992). Indians, he states, did not adopt “alien ideas like price and profit” (p. 18). Economic activity, instead, remained moored in “ancient cultural traditions” (p. 28).

Stephanie Cole, in contrast, muddies the waters. Less willing to draw sharp distinctions between “northern” market relations and “southern” patriarchies, Cole explores the nexus of the two types of market culture within elite white households. Cole’s subject—white mothers’ desire to hire free white women as nurses rather than relying on enslaved black women’s labor—pits the “politics of domesticity” against the “politics of slavery.” Cole argues that white southerners could, and did, hold bourgeois values within a slaveholding culture and that the clash of the two redrew social categories. Emily Clark argues much the same in a vastly different context and culture: that of the Ursuline nuns of New Orleans who communally managed a plantation, slaves, and other financial assets without a male advisor. Their practices, she argues, significantly differed from the male and female models available to them. Therefore, according to Clark, they “testify to the diversity of feminine possibilities” and, I would argue, to the diversity of market relations.

Shifting from employers and managers to textile workers, Michelle Gillespie challenges historians to question their basic assumptions about southern women, whose identity, she holds, was shaped not only by “their place in a patriarchal world” but also by “their skills, duties, and, in some cases their occupations” (p. 263). On one hand, Gillespie states, industrialization indicates the strength of southern culture in determining “proper social roles for men and women regardless of class” (p. 272). Adult men and women avoided wage work in mills. Unwilling to forfeit the symbols of independence, men moved their families to mill towns but pursued agricultural or artisanal work, while their wives operated boarding houses or took in sewing. Meanwhile, they sent their daughters to work in the mills. As dependents, daughters had no independence to be sacrificed. On the other hand, Gillespie notes, mill work “profoundly altered” familial relationships by “actually making the male household head dependent on women and children for support” (p. 276). Mill work, therefore, functioned within paternalism while also serving to invert it.

As the editors state, *Neither Lady nor Slave* is intended to raise as many questions as it answers. The essays provide rich ground for future research regarding both the subjects they uncover and the theoretical questions they raise. The essays strive, as Emily Clark states, to “help lift the cloak of invisibility woven by a series of shopworn dichotomies: dependent, independent; rich, poor; leisured, working; lady, slave” (p. 214). What lies beyond these categories remains in question. But the challenge has been issued. *Neither Lady nor Slave* deserves a wide reading.

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